

Divergence on the Lectionary - First Sunday after Christmas, All Years

First Reading

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations. (ESV)

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet,
until her righteousness goes forth as brightness,
and her salvation as a burning torch.
The nations shall see your righteousness,
and all the kings your glory,
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. (ESV)

Second Reading

Galatians 3:23-25, 4:3-7

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are

all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 1:1–18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our reading from Isaiah for this Sunday begins with the conclusion of one oracle of comfort from Isaiah 61 and then goes on to the beginning of another, separate one from chapter 62. The first two verses are the ending of the chapter that begins with the familiar phrase, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me.” Their inclusion as an introduction to the verses from chapter 62 makes me wonder what the Lection Choosers were thinking.

Whatever they were thinking, we have portions of two different oracles with a similar theme, the encouragement of God’s people returned from exile. Most scholars (myself not really included) attribute chapters 56-66 of Isaiah to a third source who prophesied during the post-exilic period. Some think that this prophet “Third Isaiah” was a student of the prophet called “Second Isaiah” (chapters 40-55). Others think that Third Isaiah was more a scribe, someone who worked from Second Isaiah’s written texts. Others think that there was a school of prophets who were students of First and Second Isaiah. Personally, I am willing to believe that God may have prophesied to three different periods of Judah’s history through one man, who may or may not have fully understood the context into which he was being called to speak.

I don’t find that identifying the source matters that much, though. Whether one many or three or one or two and a school, all were animated by the same Spirit. It is the Spirit’s word to them and through them to us that matters.

In the two oracles of which we have parts for this week, we find slightly different emphases. The first two verses conclude a passage that is focused on the restoration of the one on whom is the “Spirit of God.” Scholars vary as to the identity of this “one,” but initially it appears that the prophet speaks of himself. Then we begin to grasp that this oracle is the prophet speaking on behalf of the people. “I” am all of God’s righteous, those who have remained faithful through the trials of the Babylonian exile. And God’s favor will rest on the nation in a way that it will be seen by all nations.

The emphasis of the second oracle is different. It is centered on the glory that Judah will receive from the nations when she is restored. They will see the beauty with which God’s people are adorned and Judah will become the nation to which all nations are drawn. While it places God’s people at the center of that vision, this oracle partakes of the universalism that we find elsewhere in Isaiah. With Judah as God’s gravitational center, They will draw all people in. All nations.

The image brightness, on God's people as a torch is likely the reason that this passage was linked in 1 Christmas with the Prologue from John and the emphasis there on Jesus as the "light of the world." But this text seems to say to us that, while Jesus may have been the light of the world in His time, we are that light now, the light destined to draw all people to God.

Second Reading

This is one of those weeks where the text of the ESV is going to sound strange alongside the NRSV that many of you will hear read on Sunday morning. Paul refers to all of his readers/hearers as "sons" of God. He doesn't say "child." Translating it "child" isn't entirely inaccurate because Paul intends to include both genders, but I prefer the more word-for-word translation here because it carries all the echoes that Paul also intended.

I understand (as well as one can who lives with the privilege of being male) how the language of "sons" carries with it the history of deprivation and terror that women have suffered over the centuries. But I also think that by using the same words that Paul uses rather than changing them we help to deconstruct their ability to perpetuate the same. Every time we quote Paul and use the word "sons" for everyone we strip it of some of its power to bestow power on some while denying it to others.

It's pretty obvious that Paul himself doesn't use the word to lift up some while oppressing others. Right here in the verses that were omitted he states very clearly that among those who are in Christ, there is no male and female. But his use of the word sons means "child with the privileges of a son" in his context. More than that it carries the weight of the phrase "son of God." Not Son with a capital "S," but still, son of God in the same way that Luke used the phrase to speak of Adam. (Luke 3:38) Indeed, this is precisely why we see Paul shift from "neither/nor" to "and" in the verses we skip in church for this Sunday. Neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, no male *and* female. He has marched us backwards right through salvation history to Adam in whom both genders, all genders still resided before Eve was created, so Paul uses the very words from the Septuagint regarding God's creation of humankind, male *and* female.

I think that using the NRSV translation for Sunday worship, especially when we're going to skip the verses that eradicate gender in Paul's anthropology, is a good thing. The folks who chose our lessons for this week had another emphasis, the way that our perception of our own nature is changed in the revelation of Jesus Christ, a much more Christmas-aligned point. But for the purposes of *study* of the lections, I think it's worth wrestling with the text as we really have it and wresting from the word "sons" some of its power to oppress while laying hold of every inch of elevation Paul intended to convey to everyone of all genders.

Gospel Text

I'm more than a little intimidated, trying to write anything useful about what may be the most devastatingly beautiful and beautifully *essential* texts in the whole of the Bible, that is, the Prologue to John. One article's author said that the whole of the Gospel (I think he meant John) was only an exegesis of John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

John struggles, and succeeds mightily, to describe the Christian community's experience of the Risen Christ in and among them and to ground that experience in the earthly experience of those who walked with Jesus. To do this he took a hymn to the Logos and added his commentary. Scholars have yet to sort out definitively which is which. (Though some broad agreements exist.) Scholars will also show us how deeply indebted the idea of the pre-existence of the Logos is to the pre-existent Sophia of the Wisdom literature, especially Proverbs 8:22-31.

What I want to keep your focus on is that, while John wove his Prologue from these elements (and several others) the total of what he created is far greater than the sum of its parts. He does not build his theology of the nature of Christ from these different elements. Rather, he redefines all those elements in light of Who Christ Is.

And Who Christ Is is summed up in 1:14. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." Christ did not eschew physical existence (gnosticism), He became flesh. He did not "seem" to take on flesh (docetism) He became flesh. Christ did not just "become human" (John could have said *anthropos*, but chose *sarx*) He became *flesh*, with all it's weakness and vulnerability.

It is this Jesus Christ that sets Christians apart from every other religion. He is the reason the world needs the Gospel. There is much to commend the guidance we find in any other faith if you look closely, but not one of them (that I'm aware of) declares that God's love for us is so intense that the only way to express it was to become *as we are*. It is only the enormity of that reality, when it dawns on a human heart, that has the power to transform rather than conform. It changes us, to use Paul's language, from slaves to sons and daughters and sets us free to live according to our God-given natures and not our fears. This Gospel has changed the world, and It will continue to do so until the the earth shall be filled with the Glory of God as the waters cover the sea.